

# How to reduce adolescent smoking in low-income and middle-income countries



Based on current trends, smoking is predicted to cause 1 billion deaths in the 21st century.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, there are signs of hope. Although the number of smokers has increased worldwide due to population growth, daily smoking prevalence among men fell from 41% in 1980 to 31% in 2012, and from 11% to 6% in women in the same time.<sup>2</sup> 52 years since the first US Surgeon General's report on smoking and health, the academic and policy debate is increasingly about the most efficient strategies for the tobacco endgame and a world where less than 5% of the adult population use tobacco.<sup>3</sup>

The tobacco epidemic is moving from high-income countries to low-income and middle-income countries (LMICs).<sup>4</sup> To achieve global tobacco use prevalence of less than 5%, a sustained focus in these countries is required. Tobacco deaths are declining in high-income countries; by 2030, 6.8 million of the projected 8.3 million annual global tobacco deaths will be in LMICs, where tobacco deaths are expected to double between 2002 and 2030.<sup>4</sup> The tobacco industry needs to keep recruiting young smokers to replace these smokers who are dying. In *The Lancet Global Health*, Bo Xi and colleagues<sup>5</sup> describe tobacco use and secondhand smoke exposure in young adolescents in 68 LMICs. Monitoring of progress by use of surveys such as the Global School-based Health Survey (GSHS) and the Global Tobacco Youth Survey (GYTS) is essential to understand whether current policies are working, especially in LMICs where data are more limited.

Unfortunately, Xi and colleagues cannot neatly compare their new global and regional estimates for LMICs with earlier published estimates due to their use of different countries, different age groups, and different questions.<sup>6,7</sup> The results are more useful at a national level, where data can be used to improve national policy. As with much tobacco use data, the results demonstrate enormous variation between countries, even within the same region. These differences can provide important lessons about tobacco control success and failure. For example, Xi and colleagues highlight the very high adolescent smoking prevalence and prevalence of exposure to secondhand smoke in the small Pacific island nation of

Kiribati. However, national data can hide variations in smoking prevalence within countries due to important social determinants such as education levels, wealth, and gender.<sup>8</sup> Research about these subnational differences in smoking in LMICs is also important to inform policy.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, the most strategic tobacco control policies to reduce adolescent smoking and secondhand smoke exposure in LMICs may not be those targeting adolescents. Targeted campaigns can be expensive, and are unlikely to be as effective as the more affordable tobacco control policies in the WHO *Framework Convention on Tobacco Control*, and its MPOWER package of policies.<sup>9</sup> For example, raising tobacco taxes can lead to rapid decreases in tobacco consumption, has a greater impact on younger than older smokers, is achievable in LMICs, and leads to increased government revenue for other tobacco control policies.<sup>10</sup> Adolescents will also benefit from LMICs banning tobacco advertising and promotion, and introducing regulations to protect non-smokers from second-hand smoke. Because the current and future profitability of transnational tobacco companies is reliant on smoking increasing in LMICs, these companies continue to target children in their marketing and promotion of tobacco. They use their considerable political influence to consistently oppose the introduction of evidence-based tobacco control policies in LMICs, and undermine these policies when introduced.<sup>11</sup> Without exposing and combating the influence of these tobacco companies, we will not be able to effectively reduce adolescent smoking or deaths from smoking in LMICs.

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We declare no competing interests.

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